

Angela Bates

The Kansas African-American History Trail



Buffalo Soldier Monument, Ft. Leavenworth, KS. Photograph by Mike Snell.

While there are only a handful of existing sites to remind us of their important role in Kansas history, African Americans are now being recognized in Kansas through memorials, historic designations, and commemorations. Though few, all remaining physical reminders are of significance for they exemplify the existence of the African American and his participation in settling the western frontier. Still fewer sites remind us of the African-American heroes and events of the 20th century. All over the state, Kansans are working hard through legislative and grass roots efforts to ensure that African-American history in Kansas is not forgotten but is researched, preserved, and celebrated.

African Americans began coming to the promised land of Kansas as early as the 1850s. They came—both freestaters and former slaves—to break virgin prairie sod and to build new homes. In doing so, they changed the color of the face of the Kansas frontier forever, joining white settlers and Native Americans in integrating the prairie. Their legacy of courage carried into the 20th century as Kansans spearheaded the effort to end segregation in America's public schools. African Americans are now being recognized through memorials, historic designations, and commemorations for their important role in Kansas history.

The site of old Fort Blair, which was built with the assistance of the black soldiers, is now owned by the Baxter Springs Historical Society and plans are underway to rebuild it when funds are available. Fort Blair was located just north of the museum and the battle site is located north and west of Baxter Springs High School.

With the western migration of white settlers as well as African Americans, the Native Americans began to see a

slow invasion of their land. The Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Osage, Pawnee, and other Plains tribes began to fight to hold on to their native homelands. As their battles ignited into full-blown war, the U.S. Army increased its regiments insisting that the military need was now in the western frontier where the country was rapidly growing. Many felt enough military assistance already had been given to reconstruct the war-torn South.

In 1866, the African American was given full military status by Congress, and the Army designated the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalries as all Colored regiments. The 10th U.S. Cavalry was organized and headquartered at Fort Leavenworth where these first official African-American soldiers were given a blue uniform, equipment, and a horse and immediately sent to posts scattered around the state.

Dubbed "buffalo soldiers" by the Cheyenne Indians because their hair looked similar to that of the buffalo, these African-American soldiers patrolled throughout Kansas and helped to build forts, lay telegraph lines, guard railroad workers, as well as fight the Native American. Members of the 10th U.S. Cavalry wore the name "buffalo soldier" with pride, using the buffalo as a symbol in their military insignia.

Although Fort Leavenworth served as headquarters for the 10th U.S. Cavalry, the soldiers were forced, because of prejudice, to camp in a swampy area outside the fort. In this same area today, visitors can peer up at the 14' Buffalo Soldier Monument, dedicated by General Colin Powell on July 25, 1992. The monument commemorates the outstanding contributions and military records of the men of the 10th U.S. Cavalry.

The 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalries became the most decorated regiments in U.S. Army history. Twenty-three members received Congressional Medals of Honor for their gallant efforts and exceptional service under such harsh and rigid conditions. The regiment was disbanded in 1952 when the armed services were integrated. At the U.S. Cavalry Museum at Fort Riley, an exhibit depicting the history and expeditions of the 9th and 10th Cavalries is on display.

Mounted 9th Cavalry Drill. From Riley, KS. Photo courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society.



Nicodemus

After the Civil War, thousands of African Americans left the South looking for new land and a fresh start. Many of these individuals became known as “exodusters” and moved to Kansas in hopes of finding homes and a new life. The town of Nicodemus, Kansas founded in 1877 in the rugged, wind-swept plains of the prairie, was one of the many settlements of the exodusters.

At first, the town of Nicodemus grew rapidly during the 1870s and 1880s. Many businesses were established and the population continued to grow. By 1910, there were over 600 residents of Nicodemus, Kansas. After World War I, Nicodemus began to decline with the onset of the depression and hard times for local farmers. Although the town never became deserted, the population continued to fall until only a few pioneers remain.

On January 7, 1976, Nicodemus became a National Historic Landmark. In 1993, the National Park Service completed a special resource study to assess a range of options relating to the future management, protection, interpretation, and use of Nicodemus as a site suitable and feasible for addition to the national park system. At the present time legislation concerning the final decision on Nicodemus is still pending in the Congress.

The Nicodemus story reminds us of the African-American pioneers who struggled to carve out an existence on the harsh plains of Kansas after the Civil War and of the bravery and courage of the men and women who struggled to become part of the American fabric in a violent and harsh environment.

—Harry A. Butowsky

Members of the 9th and 10th Cavalries spent much of their time in other Kansas forts and out in the field. From 1867–1869, Fort Larned, now a National Historic Site operated by the National Park Service, was the first duty station for the 10th Cavalry. The men were sent to assist in guarding the Santa Fe Trail.

Fort Hays also became the temporary station for the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalries during the years of 1867 to 1869 and 1881 to 1885. While the soldiers were stationed at Fort Hays, there were tense racial conditions and many town battles erupted between the soldiers and the white settlers. Several soldiers were lynched as a result. Across from Fort Hays College, near a train truss, a roadside sign marks the place where these soldiers were hung.

Gradually, African Americans moved into the western frontier, first as soldiers and then with a slow and steady migration into and through Kansas as drivers and assistants on wagon trains and stagecoaches and as homesteaders on free government land.

For three seasons in the early 1870s, Wichita was a booming Kansas “cowtown” as thousands of Texas longhorn cattle were driven by cowboys up the Chisholm Trail for shipment east by railroad. More than one-third of the cowboys were African American, Native American, or Mexican.

“Cattle raising dominated the South as a means of livelihood from the end of the 18th century until King Cotton achieved primacy just before the Civil War,” wrote author David Dary in *Cowboy Culture*. “It was not unusual for a plantation owner in the South to have slaves on horse-back herding and hunting down lost cattle. Descendants of these southern cow-hunters were probably among the first black Texas cowboys.”

According to a Kansas State Historical Society publication titled *Cattle Towns*, “Black cowboys rode the ranges of Texas before the Civil War. After the war and abolishment of slavery, many chose to remain cowboys. The black cowboy was very much a part of the long drives north.” Their stories are told at the Old Cowtown Museum in Wichita, Kansas.

During these pioneer years, many African-American towns were organized, platted, and settled. Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, a former slave from Tennessee, is noted for fueling the great “exodust” of 1879–1880, when an estimated 20,000 African Americans from the south sought the free lands of Kansas. An African-American town organized by Singleton and named after him was located five miles north of Baxter Springs. Singleton was also responsible for assisting and organizing the Dunlap settlement near Council Grove and Morton City in Hodgeman County. Although there were over a half dozen all African-American settlements in Kansas, little is known about their short-lived histories. Many of these small towns were organized and promoted by ministers, freed slaves, and former runaway slaves.

Nicodemus is the only remaining African-American town that stands as witness to this time in frontier history. Located on the southeastern border of Graham County on the high plains of northwestern Kansas, Nicodemus with fewer than 60 residents, struggles to hold on to its rich past. The town is the site of the oldest recorded African-American-operated post office in the U.S. It is also the oldest and only remaining African-American town west of the Mississippi River. It survived the lack of a railroad, the Great Depression, and its residents leaving because of hardship and misfortune. Since 1878, the town has pulled together for its annual Emancipation Celebration in July. Plans are underway for the town to be declared a National Historic Site and incorporated into the National Park Service.

Angela Bates is President of the Nicodemus Historical Society. She is a member of the founding family of Nicodemus, the oldest existing African-American settlement.

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